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Good Afternoon, Senator Flexer, Representative Hennessy, Senator Gomes, Representative Nicastro and members of the Veteran Affairs Committee. I am Heather Sandler, a Social Worker, Mother, wife, professor, and former staffer to U.S Senator Richard Blumenthal. Before I was any of those however, I was a United States Navy Veteran.

I am sorry that I cannot be there today but wanted to provide my written testimony in support of SB205, An Act Concerning Women Veterans. After ten years four deployments and a terrible life changing experience on active duty I was honorably discharged in 2005. I came to Connecticut to marry my college sweetheart without any knowledge of what benefits I was entitled to except my education benefits. A chance encounter here at the LOB in 2010 while I was a UCONN Graduate Student Intern changed my life. It opened a door to meet other women Veterans and to develop relationships with many of you and some of the other women sitting in the audience and testifying today.

SB205 is vital and important to Women Veterans as a population of Veterans who continue to be undervalued and underserved. Even as you meet today approximately 20% of women who served in Iraq and Afghanistan have been diagnosed with PTSD, and 27% of women Vietnam Veterans suffered from PTSD sometime during their lives. (National Center for PTSD). In Connecticut there are over 16,000 Women Veterans having served in all eras, including World War II through Iraq and Afghanistan.

As our military continues to drawdown the numbers of veterans coming back to CT will continue to grow. The National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics predicts that the Women Veteran population will continue to increase to over 20% of the total Veteran population by the year 2030, while the overall projected Veteran population will continue to decrease.

These numbers and the strong women who have testified before you today are the reason why we must put into action a Women Veteran's Outreach program. I know I am not alone in having struggled to find resources and benefits. I know that I should have accessed VA care much sooner than I did. No Veteran, especially a Female Veteran should have to struggle with her demons and not have someplace to turn. I know the arguments will be why are women veterans "special" why are they different than any other veteran. We are different because we ARE that 1% who volunteered to enter into military service. There has not been any time in our nation's history that women were called into service. We have earned the right to access benefits just like our male counterparts.

I implore you to work with the Women Veteran's Task Force, the Commissioner and Women Veterans across the State of Connecticut to pass SB205. I am committed to ensuring another Sister in Arms knows that she is not alone. I was assisted by a Woman Veteran by a stroke of luck. It should not be a stroke of luck that brings Women Veterans to their benefits, rights, care, and support be it state or federal.

Thank you for your time and attention to this important matter. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions.